

BONSAI CHURCHES

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THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR ROOTS

Some years ago I stood with an old Victorian farmer looking at a large gum tree that had fallen to the ground. I wondered out loud what could have caused it to fall. The trunk was thick. The branches were large. It was a tall tree, many, many years old. What could have caused it to fall? It appeared to have been in good health when it came down. The old farmer replied, "Something wrong with the roots, that's what brought it down." And that set me to thinking. The same thing happens to Christians, to preachers, to churches. Why do Bible preaching churches adopt Rick Warren's Purpose Driven church growth methods? Why do Independent Baptist churches join the Southern Baptist Convention? Why do fundamental Baptists support Billy Graham, when they know of his infatuation with all things ecumenical? Something wrong with the roots; it's as simple as that.

Our roots are the secret to spiritual growth, strength, and fruitfulness. Dendrologists tell us that a tree's root system is the most important part of the tree. The invisible roots are often as large as the visible part of the tree. They reach as deep and spread as wide underground as the branches do above ground. They anchor the tree so that it withstands great windstorms. The roots give access to moisture and nutrients in the soil. The roots bear the fruit. That is what the Scriptures teach. "The root of the righteous shall not be moved. The root of the righteous yieldeth fruit" (Proverbs 12: 3, 12). These verses describe our deep, personal, and fruitful relationship with the Lord.

The righteous man of Psalm 1 is a man with roots. He is the man planted by the rivers of waters. He brings forth fruit in his season. His leaf does not wither. His every work prospers. He is unlike the wicked, the chaff the wind blows away. The righteous man in Scripture has roots; roots in the Word, roots in the Lord, strong, stable, well watered, and fruitful.

Ephesians 3:16-19 speaks of the importance of being rooted and grounded in the love of God. Colossians 2:7 speaks of being rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith. God's Word clearly teaches that strong churches grow because of strong men, men with roots.

RICK WARREN'S ROOT SURGERY ON FUNDAMENTAL CHURCHES

Many fundamental churches are allowing radical surgery to be done to their roots.

Though Rick Warren's program for church growth is very popular with pastors all over the world, there are the following points of concern:

- 1) Independent Baptist churches are following the lead of Southern Baptist churches. The Southern Baptist Convention is unashamedly committed to New Evangelicalism, or worse.
- 2) Rick Warren did not invent his program for church growth; he learned it from Robert Schuller, the pastor of the Crystal Cathedral. *Christianity Today* (11/08/2002) printed the following description of Warren's involvement with Schuller, "During his last year in seminary, he and Kay drove west to visit Robert Schuller's Institute for Church Growth. 'We had a very stony ride out to the conference,' (Kay) said, because such nontraditional ministry scared her to death. Schuller, though, won them over. 'He had a profound influence on Rick,' Kay says. 'We were captivated by his positive appeal to nonbelievers. I never looked back.'"
- 3) Schuller has for many years preached a false gospel of self-esteem.
- 4) Schuller's church growth program is built upon his false gospel.
- 5) His false gospel is a part of what he calls "possibility thinking."
- 6) Robert Schuller states openly that he learned his possibility thinking from Norman Vincent Peale.
- 7) Peale was greatly influenced by the noted modernist, Harry Emerson Fosdick.

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Bonsai's, those beautiful miniature trees, are produced by a simple technique. When the tree is young, it is gently removed from its pot, the roots are carefully trimmed, and the trunk and branches are wrapped with wire to shape it as the grower wishes. From time to time, the tree is pulled up and its roots are trimmed again. It is planted in a pot too small for its roots to spread. The potting soil is carefully formulated to limit the tree's supply of nutrients. But its roots are the secret to its size. The grower sets out intentionally to limit the growth of its root system. It never becomes what God intended it to be because its roots are kept small. People all over the world can have a little pet tree in their gardens, bearing tiny flowers or fruit; with miniature leaves and bark patterns and shaped to look very old. It is beautiful, but it is a bit sad to see a giant of the forest dwarfed into a garden curiosity.

THE TRIMMING OF OUR ROOTS

There is a parable here. Schuller and his disciples are doing root surgery on churches all over the world. Because they are men with charismatic personalities, men with an aura of success about them, men with media access, and often, men with wealth, they are listened to and admired. They have all the trappings of success. But we must realise that the thrust of their ministry is to trim the roots of Christians and of churches, and to wire churches into shapes the Lord never intended them to hold. They are planting churches into beautiful little pots of their own devising, but the pots are too small. There is no room for real spiritual growth. (Numerical growth there may be, but it must not be confused with growth in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ! 2 Peter 3:18) They have persuaded pastors that their churches will grow to enormous size and the pastor will prosper if he will just trim his roots. But he must learn to trim them like they have trimmed theirs.

THE ROOTS THAT ARE BEING TRIMMED

In order to grow into megachurches, their churches must become “user friendly.”

The doctrinal roots will have to be trimmed so as to avoid causing offence to the unsaved. The preacher must not make any reference to Hell or the Judgment of God. The church’s gospel will have to change; it must become a message of self-esteem. Any church which absolutely refuses to alter their message to agree with the new Warren/Schuller/Peale gospel, will find that the program for making sinners happy in order to win them to Christ, will not work for them. Their message and their method do not agree. If they do achieve success with the new methods, and they do bring in the crowds, they will find that their message HAS changed ever so subtly. It only takes a drop of the poison of Schuller’s egocentric gospel to destroy the efficacy of the Christocentric gospel of God.

The musical roots of the church will have to be trimmed. The great old hymns that teach doctrine (Col. 3:16) must be swapped for something light and frothy. This is from Saddleback’s own web site: “Although he is only 32 years old, the eclectic background of Gannin’s musical experiences ranges from accompanying the praise and worship music of John Tesh to playing with secular grunge rockers to performing with some of the top jazz musicians in the country. He also plays in Saddleback’s worship band on the weekends and in Purpose Driven Church conferences held on the Saddleback campus.” (Emphasis added)

Who is John Tesh? Wikipedia says “John Tesh (born July 9, 1952) is an American New Age / contemporary Christian musician.” It goes on to say that “He has a radio show called Intelligence for your Life, with 80’s, 90’s and today’s soft rock music.”

“New Age” linked with “Christian” would have put up bright red flags a few years ago but not so today.

Again from a Saddleback web site we read, "Music has the power to speak to the heart! Since we all have hearts that thrive on encouragement and that need to be energized -- the music at Saddleback is encouraging and energizing. We want you to get a lift and not a letdown when you come to church!" Therefore one would assume at Saddleback there is no preaching on sin, judgment, hell, the Christian's appearance, and a number of other Bible topics that may come across as negative.

The article continued to say, "We all like different styles of music, so there are several music styles to choose from at Saddleback. Currently we have three distinctly different worship styles represented in our venues." Pick and choose! Is this the method of evangelism and worship found in the New Testament?

EncouragingMusic.com had the article MUSIC AT SADDLEBACK by Rick Muchow who quotes Rick Warren as saying, "A song can often touch people in a way that a sermon can't. Music can bypass intellectual barriers and take the message straight to the heart." God says "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

Muchow then quotes Aristotle who said, "Music has the power to shape a culture." This definitely is true!

Near the end of the article Muchow says "At Saddleback our dB level ranges from 98dB to 108dB (every 3 dB doubles the volume level). Saddleback Seekers don't just want to hear the music they want to feel the music." (Emphasis added)

In years gone by this type of music would never even have been debated among Bible believing Baptists but today many of them have followed Rick Warren's and Saddleback's methods, message and music philosophy. Why have they gone this direction?

As noted earlier the root system of plants is essential for their survival and growth and often, the general decline of a tree is directly related to the health and vigor of its root system.

Fundamental Baptists once had their roots sunk deep into the Word of God where the thirsty pilgrim quenched his spiritual thirst and drew his strength from "the fountain of living waters."

In years past all things were judged by the Word. The Word was our sole rule of faith and PRACTICE. Baptists of another day had as their one desire to honour God and preach His Word which "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

But aspiration for numbers led many independent Baptists to all sorts of man made gimmicks under the guise of soul winning. One form of manipulation of the congregation was to play a certain song a certain way after the message. The message and the music were combined to have an effect on the listener.

Then there were the traveling quartets who often sang to the emotions if not to the flesh. Then there were the choirs and special music that just had to be or the service was not complete. Music had developed into performances and entertainment.

Music was entrenched in the psyche of independent Baptists and it wasn't hard for them to drift further away from the roots of Sola Scripture. Therefore many independent Baptists have accepted without question Rick Warren when he said "A song can often touch people in a way that a sermon can't" in spite of the Scripture that says "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

A recent article from Iowa State University said "Trees can share root systems. If two roots of the same species grow next to each other, as they grow in diameter, they may grow or graft together. This has implications when trees growing next to each other are infected with vascular diseases which may be transmitted through root grafts." (Emphasis added)

Independent Baptists proclaim their independency but in reality many are followers. This following brought them into an association in which their roots were infected with a disease which is exceeding great; and yet in their disease they sought not to the LORD, but rather to other church growth experts, to Saddleback and Willow Creek!!

As any discerner of the times can see the camel's head was in the music tent long before Saddleback and Willow Creek came on the scene. It is fair to ask does the Word of God, permit or prohibit such music as that at Saddleback to be in the Lord's churches.

It is interesting that the prince of preachers, C. H. Spurgeon, would not allow an organ in the Tabernacle. In the Treasury of David commenting on Psalm 33:2 he said "Men need all the help they can get to stir them up to praise. This is the lesson to be gathered from the use of musical instruments under the old dispensation. Israel was at school, and used childish things to help her to learn; but in these days, when Jesus gives us spiritual manhood, we can make melody without strings and pipes. We who do not believe these things to be expedient in worship, lest they should mar its simplicity, do not affirm them to be unlawful, and if any George Herbert or Martin Luther can worship God better by the aid of well tuned instruments, who shall gainsay their right? We do not need them, they would hinder than help our praise, but if others are otherwise minded, are they not living in gospel liberty? Sing unto Him. This is the sweetest and best of music. No instrument is like the human voice. As a help to singing the instrument is alone to be tolerated, for keys and strings do not praise the Lord. "With the psaltery and an

instrument of ten strings.” The Lord must have a full octave, for all notes are his, and all music belongs to him. Where several pieces of music are mentioned, we are taught to praise God with all the powers which we possess.”

Using musical instruments such as the organ may not be “unlawful” as Spurgeon said but has this allowance brought us to the situation we find ourselves in today? Have the piano and organ made it easier for the drums, guitars, etc to be brought in? Did the drums and other instruments lead to the hip hop, jazz and numerous other types of “Christian” music so called? Have the allowances made in the past brought us to the place where people pick and choose a church according to their personal taste?

Have we allowed our Christian liberty in the Lord of glory to be as “an occasion to the flesh”? Is the church of the Risen Lord at liberty to use just any music in its worship? I think not!

The Old Testament was written for our learning but not necessarily our mimicking. A simple perusal of the Old Testament declares that music and musical instruments played a large part in the religious and national life of Israel. But when we come to the New Testament there is almost a deafening silence. The Chief Shepherd is almost mute when it comes to telling us about music in the earthly assembly.

That silence should be saying something to the discerning believer. The roots of the apostolic and early church were in its preaching and not in its singing!

Paul said “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). Paul also said in the verse previous to that that he was always “ready to preach (not sing) the gospel”.

Preaching is the main emphasis of the churches God has left here till He comes. This is not to say singing is not to be a part of our assemblies. But singing is not the major emphasis of the Lord’s people. The apostle said in Colossians 3:16 “...teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Our singing is a means of “teaching and admonishing” those who are meeting together. But what about the unconverted? Is it true what Muchow said “Music can bypass intellectual barriers and take the message straight to the heart.”?

According to Ephesians the unregenerate are “alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” This is a condition that can only be remedied through the use of the Sword of the Spirit, Hebrews 4:12.

In the church Paul said we are to “...sing with the understanding also.” This word is translated “mind” in other places and has to do with the thinking process. The truths of

the Bible and the Christian faith can never bypass the mind or the heart if one is to be brought to Christ.

The Christian message or the songs of Zion cannot and will not be truly understood and comprehended by the unsaved until life from above is bestowed in the heart through their repentance of sin and faith in Christ.

Those churches that have not yet followed the Saddleback road must search the New Testament and set down some written guidelines rooted and grounded firmly in the Scriptures for all their ministries and especially their music ministry.

Some questions that may be asked are: Does the music of our church show our love for the world or for Christ? Is our church music a battlement that will keep the new and old believer from falling? Does our church music contribute to the saints knowing and loving God more? Does our church music appeal to the flesh or the spirit? Is our church music, songs of heaven or of the world? Do our songs teach and admonish one another in the church?

Churches are moving ever so fast from one thing to another and the question may be asked, is there hope!? There is for Jesus says “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”

The roots of the pulpit ministry are trimmed especially short. The preaching must be intentionally “dumbed down” so that spiritual meat is no longer served from the pulpit, just flavoured milk, with lots of sugar. It must be so, for strong meat will never hold together the baby Christians and the unsaved in one body. A recent visitor to Willow Creek Church commented on the lesson in the adult Sunday school, saying that it had no more content than a little kid’s Sunday school lesson.

RESULTS OF ROOT SURGERY

One of the disastrous side effects of implementing Warren’s Purpose Driven philosophy is the unwanted baggage that comes with it. Have we forgotten that when the camel gets his nose in the tent, it is not long before the camel is in the tent? And whatever baggage he has will be in the tent as well? The theological and philosophical baggage of Peale, Schuller, Hybels, and Warren is being unpacked in the fundamental churches that have adopted Warren’s method for church growth. There will be many surprises there. Remember, one of the sources of Peale’s and Schuller’s doctrines was Harry Emerson Fosdick, the infamous modernist who mocked the virgin birth of Christ. Who among us would tolerate Fosdick as a spiritual ancestor? When a camel load of error is unpacked in the church, the fundamentalists will be crowded out. It is interesting to note that almost nothing is being written about the heart broken church members who have been pushed out. They are now looking for good churches to join. These are the old stalwarts who

gave and prayed the most and often won the most people to Christ. What will happen to the churches when they are gone?

HOW TO KNOW IF THE ROOTS ARE BEING TRIMMED

We receive letters frequently from grieving Christians, telling that their churches have been led into Rick Warren's Purpose Driven program. Others fear that their churches are sliding in that direction, and have asked how they can tell if their pastors are leading them into this great error. There are many indicators of impending root surgery:

1. An overemphasis on the church increasing in size, with the pastor expressing the desire for the church to be a megachurch.
2. Statements from the pastor that old fashioned gospel preaching is not reaching people. "We have to use culturally relevant methods for winning people to the Lord."
3. Frequent quotes from the "really successful church growth experts" (like Hybels, Schuller, and, among Baptists, especially Warren!)
4. The introduction of a new musical program, including lots of choruses, and CCM music that is weak on melody and doctrinal substance, but has plenty of beat.
5. The use of musical gimmicks, praise teams, hand held microphones, electric guitars, amplifiers, backing tapes, and drum kits on the platform.
6. A change of emphasis from preaching, to entertainment, including drama, audiovisual presentations, prolonged "praise and worship" sessions, etc.
7. The pastor beginning to dress in a trendy manner and having his hair styled professionally in order to change his image.
8. The pastor performing dramatic stunts to move the church away from simple preaching of the Word.
9. A change of leadership in the church, a move to get the older and wiser Christians out of office and to put younger, inexperienced and immature people into positions of authority.
10. Dropping the mid week prayer meetings to small study groups in homes, led by those who have been trained to promote the seeker sensitive model of church growth.
11. Shorter sermons, avoiding controversial subjects like Hell and Repentance.

12. Psychology becoming more acceptable, less confrontation of sin from the Bible.
13. Avoiding having those guest preachers in to speak who preach strong doctrinal sermons that convict men of sin.
14. The pastor who is pro-Warren will accuse reluctant church members of trying to split the church.
15. Dissatisfaction with traditional church services, bringing in a party atmosphere.
16. The disappearance of a desire for revival in the church. Measuring the “Bonsai Churches”

Is our spiritual eyesight clear enough to discern that the “bonsai churches” of the 21st century are not the giant redwoods they pretend to be? Their false gospel and new marketing methods do not grow roots, they polish the leaves to a poisonous sheen. Roots are grown through old-fashioned preaching from the Bible, prayer, faith, and obedience to God’s Word. What we are seeing is nothing less than dwarfism repackaged as gigantism.

It all starts with the roots. When a church’s roots are trimmed and squeezed into the tiny pot of New Evangelicalism, and it is twisted into a world pleasing shape, the result will be microscopic fruit. The real proof of “church growth” has never been who can grow the largest congregation, but who can grow the strongest roots. We never know how strong and deep the roots are until we see how far the limbs reach in missionary work. We never know how strong the roots are until we see how much glory the tree brings to God, (not to man.) We never know how strong the roots are until we see the quality of the fruit they produce. And we never know how strong the roots are until the storm winds blow.

In the meantime we see men growing the “bonsai church.” The world’s little pet church.

One of the saddest facts about the church growth movement is the blindness of preachers who are growing these bonsai churches. I do not know of one pastor who has sat through Warren’s course on root trimming and then stepped back and objectively evaluated the whole church growth movement. Pastors who discerned and avoided Billy Graham, Campus Crusade, the Toronto Blessing, Promise Keepers, and Jerry Falwell are not seeing through this one. Good men who have shunned Schuller’s heresies in the past are now sitting at his disciples’ feet and learning them second hand.

Remember, a second hand false gospel is still a false gospel.

Remember, “baptising” a heresy so that it now has an acceptable denominational tag doesn’t make it any less a heresy.

Churches that are becoming seeker sensitive churches are looking in the wrong direction.

They must not look at their leaves and limbs.

They must look to their roots.